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ON THINGS AND MARGINS

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ON THINGS AND MARGINS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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Abstract

ON THINGS AND MARGINS by Will Machin, M.F.A.

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Director: Carlton Newton, Associate Professor, Sculpture

This thesis is an exploration into an alternate ground for discourse. It is an exploration of the edges of the possibilities of words, the centers of margins, and the question of the lives of objects in this time of abundant cast-offs. The truths and limits of an emerging globalized multi-polarity of culture, are put in play. The secret lives of things are brought into the same room as words. The potential for radical landscape is considered.

“By taking such concepts out of their established patterns and rearranging them in "constellations" around a specific subject matter, philosophy can unlock some of the historical dynamic hidden within objects whose identity exceeds the classifications imposed upon them”¹

¹ Lambert Zuidervart, "Theodor W. Adorno" in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008), Chapter 5. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/adorno/>>.

Approaching the Ontological through the Ontical: Finding the Timeless in the Daily.

Heidegger might say that this is an ontical investigation into ontological issues, before protesting this approach. That is to say, in my art, in my life, and in this investigation I approach the most sensitive questions of meaning largely through the world of things. Philosophy, which to my amateur's knowing is unstable, amorphous, and deeply beloved, seems to illuminate most brightly when it is made visible to the world *Things*. Things we make, things with whom we exercise affairs of ownership, things we throw away from us. And in particular, some beautiful thought seems to flower in new ways in spaces that, for many Things, serve as resting places: the ecosystems composed of thrown things and plants that follow roads and describe urban thickets. This complex world, so often existing outside of the language we normally use, has become the muse for my art-making, and a place where some truly complex philosophy can find a world to touch. For its own part, this terrain seems to come alive in new way in the words brought to bear from worlds of deeply self-referential thought.

I perform this ontical pursuit in the way that I do from an acquired distrust of ideology-of-and-for-itself, and a deep love of the strange lessons of the material world. My fascination with the breadth and depth of the space through which I travel as I move between the cultural world of art-making, where simulacra, stories, words and representations rule, and these material-laden ecosystems rarely waivers. So while the investigation of ideology and aesthetics in their own terms, through self-referentiality and internal interrelation is of great value in reaching possibilities that are deep, esoteric and far from the daily, that is not the central purview of my artistic investigation. It is central to this effort of words however, because it is in these deeply layered spaces of language that I find the words that speak to the complexity of the actual world of Things-in- Landscape that is central to my research as an artist. I am interested in the true strangeness that exists in the ontical world of stone, soil, plastics, growing and rotting trees, tires and the spilled nameless. This, my artist's interrogative, is an interest of the body, a direct involvement in touch, smell and proprioception; the making that precedes and

follows the interrogative has many of the same concerns at its center, but negotiates as well with the language of philosophy.

Stepping out of an impossible zero-sum comparison between the world of ideas and the world of things and into a space in discourse from which we can respond to the layering of things and ideas inherent in perception, it becomes possible to say that the complexity of the ontical world goes beyond our minds' abilities to relate ideas or perceptions to each other. Perhaps this has always been true; ecosystems and geologies both appear to present worlds that are *more* than a person could ever imagine. What is perhaps different today is that we are deeply embedded in a world *we have made* of made things that is in itself, and in its relationships to all forms of life, larger than we can imagine. I respect the investigations of great thinkers in search of the world from within a historiography of ideas, reaching out to touch the obdurate faces of things from within their work's native flows of culture. My contribution, however, is dedicated to the possibility that Thingworld, a hybrid place beyond language, outside of the extended discourse of consciousness, has grown in the complexity of our making, consumption and discarding to the point where it speaks as a process-monument to who we are, complete with flowers and moldy fur growing in the discarded folds of plastic. This paper, as a piece of the constellation that is my work, lives more firmly within the discourse around representation and expression than much of my sculpture; still, it too has many of its roots in the thing-ish vibrations between the actors of the ontical world.

To refute the Cartesian split in passing, my body, that which gets snagged by thorn bushes and lifts milk crates, is me; I in turn exist in a world of things redolent with the strange scents of the ideas that have touched them on their paths. There is a radical permeability to the actuality of being human.

Thingworld in the Places of the Word

When Socrates and Cratylus are mentioned relative to language, it is to invoke the argument that language provides a shorthand with which to evoke aspects of each thing described, while leaving the rest of the thing to slide into a non-linguistic space as an undescribed (and possibly indescribable) remainder. With Thing Theory,² we can wonder if, like words, these remainders have their own (non-linguistic) lives, and (non-)etymologies. And when we get loose from these things, throw them away and no longer seek to name them; and when they pile up, blown against fences, juxtaposed by happenstance of landing; and when they become major players in ecosystems of insurgent life and discarded things they become worlds of non-ideas, which we do not recognize under circumstances in which we and language perform our normal relationships. Even when we feel them as an unease in our stomachs, we are unable to put that feeling into words, to testify in the terms of the discourse we use to gather our world around us to what we might know fleetingly in the sensitive pulse of the corpuscle.

Thing Theory considers of the secret lives of objects, describing “what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects--their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems. Temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects).”³ Objecthood, in this framework of thought, then, describes the formed, the clearly seen, the utilitarian and the overlooked, while Thinghood speaks of the feel-able presence of objects-- the aspects of their self-performance that are before, below, or in otherwise in excess of their functional and expected range.

When a television breaks or becomes obsolete and is thrown away, landing in an alley to be

² Bill Brown, “Thing Theory.” *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001) 1-22.

³ Bill Brown, “Thing Theory.” *Critical Inquiry* 29.1 (2001), 5.

gleaned and moved to the asymptotic margin between an interstate and its on-ramp, the TV has, in a significant way, fallen out of our consciousness, out of the language we use, and out of the world-as-we know it. It has fallen from, or been pushed out of the discourse we generally use to define the world that we see. Its former space in discourse can be described in metaphor or metonym only perhaps--eddies caused by the sudden disappearance of a gallon of water from a river, or by the shape left where our pieces of the collective memory of the static crackle of the glass surface of the TV end in tired tatters. Where it once was there is now a sense of *gone* and nominally but not viscerally forgotten.

Still, the TV itself retains its weight and history, including the story of its making, its purchase, its use, its passage into disrepair or obsolescence as well as a connection to the space it occupied in the world of our identity—even as its sensory and sensual presence passes into its new place in the world. In this place, it creates and is embedded in a new set of relationships with ecosystem and the pantheon of the other discardeds. Chemicals spilled from mother board components, interruptions of the sun's light, roots pushing through cooling vents all become valid forms of discourse, when the discourse itself is grounded in the growing internal margins of the city. And I'll bite the apple of thing theory and go with the notion that within us there are identitarian selves made in society, of language, surely, but also thingish, magical, excessive, latent selves that have their own agency to influence our feelings and our comings and goings. Adorno might see this as only to be understood through “determinate negations” pointing up specific contradictions between what thought claims and what it actually delivers.”⁴

The world of thing theory, with its clear indication that objects have the ability to function in multiple modes can suggest directly that we need not enter into any kind of Oedipal either/or thinking in which one thought must remove another to exist, because a thought or experience can deliver both what it claims and something utterly other, at the same time, and to the same subject.

4 Lambert Zuidervart, "Theodor W. Adorno", in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008), Chapter 5. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/adorno/>> .

On the Question of Internal Margins in the Ontic World

*"...what is revolutionary is excess, overflow, and power. This is junkspace seen from outside: a disequilibrium and rupture multiplied on the indefinite space of the metropolis. But this is also where the multiplication of obstacles, borders, lines of fracture and walls can no longer be regarded as simply blocks dropped down by power or as swamps that one gets stuck in: they are interfaces that polarize relations."*⁵

The radical dissonance that nestles between a plastic bag and a thorn bush is an expression of a similar kind of margin; a place pressurized from all sides that offers the possibility that it can become a site from which we can see kaleidoscopic polarities and layers in new ways. Like many of the rifts I concern my making with, this one has no distinctly human actor, but instead dissonant players-- the plastic and the plant, to whom our humanity relates perhaps equally, but in radically different ways. If for a moment we de-center our worldview away from our own identities, away from culture, away from humanity even, and think about context, then we humans and the emerging plant-and-pavement planet we are making actually *are* the rift and the overlap between biology and industry. This rift is present in casual touch of fiber and skin as we walk in our clothes and in the layering-- within a single breath -- of the smells of exhaust, young leaves, deodorant, and sweat. This suggests that we might think of our very selves as de-centered schools of the techno-biological, as hybrid entities, as mobile emergences of a nature so new as to be nearly utterly unknown, yet moving through the world. You and your clothes are a posse, and that posse cannot but be called you; or perhaps, if there is a true inherent metonymy in belonging to the human race, it is also a "we", just a wildly expanded we that includes our doings and leavings with us.

I and my car and the splinter in my palm, the plastic molecules in my blood, my phone and the food I will eat and have eaten are all me -- this being that moves through the world like the legitimate but unsanctioned child of a bulldozer and a constellation-- and still, these things are part of we. The

5 Antonio Negri, "On Rem Koolhaas," *Radical Philosophy* 154 (Mach/April 2009), 49.

orders he follows, the suggestions she gives, they are respectively his and hers, though both are ours. Ours, perhaps now more than ever. It is, after all, a time of globalization, a time of small planets and big species, a moment –one that might endure or pass-- in which we touch on being able to think of an "ourselves" that is human-wide. Here we are in our multifarious glory, knee-deep in this here and now, where the de-atomized selves we have made are touching, making realms of *we* in the spaces where my thrown bottle touches your lost cap and a spider's web.

This moment of global human ken is not purpose-laden. There is no emergence of understanding commensurate with our emerging doings; there is no true question of each of us taking responsibility for our things or actions. In my art I seek, on the contrary, *us*, not an aspiration, but *us*, as seen through “interfaces that polarize relations”. To be clear, this is an aesthetics that grows out of landscapes whose existence indicts either the powerful and caring or the slovenly and powerless, depending on where you stand. This aesthetics indicts neither; it converses with the sense of fracture found in spaces that reflect dichotomy upon dichotomy (sardines versus Vuitton, stone versus paper,) and moves through that rift to a landscape in which nothing, even instability, can be depended on to be what it appears to be, and yet where the massive and congruent reiteration of human desire, human making, and living DNA insistently feeds a pantheon of architectonic entities. This is a chaotic, globe-spanning, yet bounded flow – it often ends near where the asphalt starts and again where mature forest begins; within this, there are enduring acts and recurring forms, the gods of this margin, and it is with them that my art treats.

On Archetypes and Half-lives

Damien Hurst covered a skull in diamonds seeming to open (and perhaps close) a conversation about humanity, death, wealth and beauty. Which is to say, some archetypes are of an evolutionary time scale; they can claim a unique resonance, what I call here a half-life, for as long a species remains a species, as long as we remain we. The minute that one imagines that the diamond encrusted skull

belonged to a crocodile the piece is completely changed, suggesting deeper time, and stranger, yet less intimate branchings.

Stones stood on their ends, with a sort of human height-weight-ratio range tens of thousands of years in the field of our aesthetic interests. We have been making them for that long. In their stone-ness, they suggest even deeper geological time-scales. If we see ourselves in a stone stood on end, then we may the touch of time so deep in relationship to our bodies and our lives that indeed, we could call it forever, and invite the cosmos to keep the change.

That we have hung on to this form is less central to my work than the question of how the form and the associated content, both of which have been invested with such weight by our continued interest, continue to live as the world changes. Stone still underlies our feet. And it still adds the weight of a foreverness to the things we make from it, be they granite-clad skyscrapers, standing stones, or rock walls and fire-pits. We have history with this feeling of foreverness. As fire-pits became -places and gave over their roles as primary sites of gathering to the curved glass cathode ray tubes of the golden age of television, there is a suggestion that the notion of forever experienced a split, into the sphere of the movie star fame and the sphere of the stones. For us, what is the difference between the fame of John Wayne and the half-life of a granite dolman? Each will outlast the generation that follows us, leading to a gradation of what is, in the terms of the half-lives of our embodied selves, two forevers from different parents.

I come to this from the common juxtaposition of a broken television spilling its glass on the rock that broke it. Both, suddenly have such an internal geology, with the fracture and hardness and other attributes of stone. And the TV is such a recognizable rift, connecting back to that space of *gone* where it used to sit. In its new, more Thingish, context, that sense of filmic forever from its former life finds a dance partner as the now-unconcealed stoniness of the glass TV tumbles onto the rocking ground, connecting that space of *gone* within our identitarian discourse to longer questions of obelisk, stone, self and time.



Death of an Archetype:

But what of a television itself? Its lifespan as an archetype may be ending now. Certainly its role is changing, no longer common culture to a nation or a world as much as provider of a choice of realities to the connected as it merges its modality with the internet. The short half-life of an archetype does not mean that it is less potent; it means simply that its time-register is not as deep. But like ephemeral sculptures lost to time but not to image and discourse, each TV had its part in the making of a forever longer than itself.

It is worth noting that as the scale of archetypal time appears to shrink, we approach the other end, the not-forever end of the scale. It sometimes feels as if we should be approaching the present day as stone gives way to wheels, or milk crates, but what is actually happening in terms of the half-life of an archetype is that we are approaching first the cycles and then the fashion-cycles of industrial capitalism, where new classes of archetype serve in new ways. Even the birth of archetype is altered, so that both industrial need or behavior-altering advertising can operate alongside, against, or in ignorance of slower forms of myth-making.

In the cycles of industry, then, of all forms, the wheel has a uniquely deep and embedded place. In many ways the wheel makes the physical margin, although the infrastructure of the margin lasts so much longer than most physical wheels that it can also be said that the margin performs as the ruler to the making of new wheels. To be clear, like any archetype I find at play in the margins of life, the wheel is fully interpenetrated and co-overlaying with the landscape that holds it.

No longer just a way to move weight more easily and swiftly, it commands metaphoric space and our perseverations, our making and remaking. It underlies, and orders. It is so un-specific that it is part of the root DNA of the project of industry. In landscape post-industry, near-industry, or edging industry, it is no stretch of reality to think that our patterns of thought and action are in part a function of the motion of the wheel. And like all good memes and archetypes, while we perpetuate it, it not only

perpetuates *us* in our new, post-wheel selves, but also creates and maintains its host of secondary offspring. In this case any species or thing that shows itself a success in the ecosystem that provides envelope to the roads of our planet can be considered the offspring of the wheel.

In the piece *Thicket* then, I am sharing the urban thicket in the form and motion that makes it what it is, reflecting the eddies that surround the wheel, finding “*Even where murky zones appear in this complicated tapestry, they too are abuzz with obscure and connected activity*”.⁶

Following page: Thicket. 2010. Railroad ties, overhead projectors, a tree, thorn bushes and thrown-away things. 11'x15'x3'

⁶ Gean Moreno and Ernesto Oroza, “Generic Objects,” *E-Flux Journal* 18 (September 2010): 3.





This wheel catches the wind from the exhaust fans of the projectors and spins, setting the thicket in the motion of a wheel. As it moves over the projectors, it casts light shadow and projection into the room, surrounding the viewers

Playing the margin into the world:

These forms as archetypes become not fixed images, but visual centers around which multiple popular forms are made, and from whose continual uneven decay comes much of the radical flux and flow of the internal margins. They organize matter through our doings, creating obsessive multiplications of themselves. Their everyday offspring, the things themselves, pass through use and arrive with impact in the ontical margins like a television hitting a matt of rotting leaves. Even in this mirror world, this place that philosophers conceive of as a rupture through which to pass, they have currency, organizing life forms around them, and releasing other aspects of their materiality, creating previously suppressed relationships. Like many spaces conceived of as transitory, these margins have their own inertia. Protected by their undesirability and their proximity to typically entrenched interests like roads, buildings and other infrastructure, they become sites of negotiation, un-negation, and life.



Thickett, 2011 detail.

Television glass rediscovers its geologic fracture, its glass shimmer and danger, and its internal poisons, creating simultaneous new dialogs with ecosystem and with the deep time of geology, bringing back the knowledge that glass is, in its provenance, stone. This is perhaps the answer to an almost asked question: “what happens when a tree falls in the woods and no one is listening”? The tree enters into new susurrant conversations with the earth underneath its fallen trunk; the old car battery that was sitting on a stone and now is crushed on the ground leaves a lasting dead circle within the host of animals and plants the tree will now feed. Life and things do not depend on consciousness for their world-forming activities. Similarly, the thrown discarded object, like the falling tree, lands in a dense conversation of life, decay, malfunction and abjection. In this conversation, all objects made for function enact their secondary, unintended functions, in a conversation that is the bent negative image of their makers' intent. It is quite possible that much of our consciousness is shaped by the size of that reiterated image, unbeknownst to us.

Similar plants and animals inhabit these disturbed habitats across the globe. Rats, pigeons, Japanese knotweed, poison ivy, tree of heaven. It is further connected by globe-spanning patterns of disposability and consumption, by the content and the sameness of the leavings of factory-capitalism itself. Lastly, this discontinuous fringe-within is connected by a sense of rupture and abject contingency; it is the place next to modern capitalism where modern capitalism is not, and as Adorno might say, it is in some ways an expression of the heart of capitalism. It is a space that proposes new hierarchies, and new kinds of activity, rife as it is with raw or distorted echoes of capitalist archetypes.

The Archetype with no Face

“Within their systems of circulation, generic objects are alien to the way a city produces meaning.

Though the crates surely carry the potential for a social function, they have been optimized to such a



Illustration 1: Detail, 4 Gallons

are utterly of us, they move outside our knowing, but with our support. Unlike language, that demands our love if not our understanding, milk crates and the other uber-generics, with the bigness of the system of factories, trucks, shipping containers they imply, seem merely to ask us to keep out of their way while they negotiate their own movements.

degree that their relation to the human is reduced to a single value or dimensional datum.

Milk crates in this environment are surfaces radically devoid of meanings, figures of such alarming blankness on a symbolic plane that their emptiness overwhelms.”⁷

In this blankness, milk crates are admirably suited to represent a world of cultural latency within our larger projects of making. They are not for meaning, they are for function. What if these are the new archetypes, mutely moving from carrying milk to carrying water with notice given. I suggest, in the piece *4 Gallons* that though these objects

⁷ Ibid.



In the margin, however, their form fails to fit the connect of sidewalk and wall, or dolly and shelf, truck and pallet. They instead become free to talk, telling small stories, and through sheer numeric weight, establishing a specific relationship with tires that tells still more about their movements in the world.

On Heterogeneity and the Monolith.

*“In that way it [heterology] leads to the complete reversal of the philosophical process, which ceases to be the instrument of appropriation, and now serves excretion; it introduces the demand for the violent gratifications implied by social life”*⁸

The worlds at play here certainly are complex and arbitrary enough in to reverse most philosophical processes. Maybe understanding always leaves out content, but in the case of these non-identitarian spaces (spaces whose primary existence is that they are *not*, that they are between other spaces) the content is not only left out of understanding, it remains unavoidably present and disruptive, except within the spaces made by archetype. Wheels, monoliths, binary structures of thought, even wooden sheds are still heavy enough to leave dimples around which the seemingly free-flowing heterogeneity sometimes organizes. And this has much to tell us about art here and now.

Judy Pfaff, Julie Mehretu, Mark Bradford, Sarah Sze, and many other artists suggest, in some way, that objecthood is fracturing in the face of the heterogeneity. I take no issue with the art or the suggestion; they are some of my favorites. But it is not mine to concentrate on this dissolving, but to move within that dissolve to see structures that remain, built and rebuilt.

8 Georges Bataille, "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade (An Open Letter to My Current Comrades)," (1930), trans. by Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. excerpted from *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1985), 97.

On Oedipus Making Art

One of the most beautiful things about making culture is that exploration might be a word that better describes the thing we do than progress. Newton was not replaced by Einstein who was not replaced by the corpus of quantum mechanics. Newtonian physics, relativity and quantum mechanics are all operating in the world side-by-side. In many ways, the questions that each is able to address is bounded by the distances we can see when we use each to look. And they show little promise of being able to stretch to answer questions of being, of why, of starting and ending. Damien Hurst does not replace Picasso. Both of them are part of corpus, the recorded body of art, which is continuously growing, even carrying with it a bridal train of forgotten cells that can re re-membered at need. Now is a time when we keep track of culture as it goes by.

Competition within art is an odd jousting match of between apples, oranges and dirty band-aids. The question of tradition in art is fraught, paired with the aesthetic thirst for the new and the idea, however outmoded, that art-as-the-vanguard of culture must be ahead of the rest of culture. Artists who work in utterly different modes, and towards different ends compete for the same life-giving opportunities. But the art world itself -- if I can treat us all as an entity for a moment, recognizing that I am speaking of the eye of the Fates as if it were the whole of the three-- replaces one artist with another, managing a salad of traditions and innovations. Still, art's terrain grows, even as the traditions of making that can be drawn upon experience fertile evolutions, seedless mutations and salted-earth extinctions. The present art world, within that, is growing in complexity and in the number of possible internal polarities, as its own embedded history grows and as it continues to offer spaces better than Reason for the experience of things that might not go into words.

In the meantime, the argument about legitimacy within art-making is by no means a zero-sum game; on the contrary, beyond the positioning and connectedness of the artist, it is a question of terrain and talent, both of which may well be as inexhaustible as our abilities to touch or otherwise sense the universe.

Dissolution, the Burning House and the Pained Build

Amidst this world of Abundances that can feel like burdens, art serves in more ways than we can describe, from celebrating excess for its own sake to advocating a variety of new ascetic modes. I am interested in the ways that three of these art-paths respond to the decentralized and overwhelming abundance of the toady's material world.

The dissolution of the object comes in many forms; the flowing lines and vectors of Mehretu's work; the exploding shack in Cornelia Parker's work; Ati Maier's fields and radians; Sara Sze's loose organizations of bits into a beautiful excess without defined edges. We could stretch the terrain sideways and back in time, adding in Bukowski's or Tom Waits' embrace of the grace of the fallen. Each of these strains of culture rides in the other's sidecar. Dissolution, in a world that is dissolving. There is a power and a beauty in the imagining of one form or another of letting go. Not necessarily into a freedom, but into a beauty and a myriad. Perhaps we actually become multipolar molecular structures looking back at the art, and need not engage with the fixedness of where we are. The possibility of that flight and shift is deeply valuable to me as a blow to the unitary nature of my own subjectivity. To love this work, which I do, may be to love art's ability to speak in the form of constellations instead of singularities. In a time and place of de-centering flows here in the United States at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, an appreciation of the beauty that occurs when one thing is in fact many or when an idea is partly dissolved seems timely.

The Burning House

Japanese Tea houses -- small, spare ceremonial spaces for the formal drinking of tea -- have been described as places that allow one to escape “from the burning house which is the world... and to leave the mundane world behind”⁹. This characterization of the world as a burning house contrasted with a place of cultural safety has roots that run back to a Mahayana Buddhist parable written in the Lotus Sutra over 2000 years ago. The tea house as a rarified cultural space and a refuge from the “painful existence of ignorance and self-attachment”¹⁰ came into popularity somewhere between a thousand and hundred years ago. Art-like spaces have existed as a reflective and meditative counterpoint for a long time, balancing days spent immersed in the spectacular roaring and rumbling of the highway, the stock exchange, the presidential inauguration, the battlefield. Mark Rothko's color fields, even Donald Judd's cubes offer spaces that differ both from each other and from the Tea House, but that offer us an escape from the daily, a quiet within the inferno. Perhaps they also offer us a moment in which we can hear our own blood rushing, our own breath coming and leaving, in a way reminiscent of a seashell offering us the ocean. This kind of viewing experience is also of value to me. While I think we can never stop raising the question of why we make worlds from which we feel the need to escape, and what it means for art to facilitate a temporary escape, it feels, at its basic foundation, like a functional response to the material overload of the world as it is. Perhaps it is true as well that in this world the kind of quiet carried by certain art objects can be called a radical revision of the daily. Much art, and many art contexts, from the spare white walls of the proverbial gallery to the understated richness of the museum building, clearly seek to create and highlight this aspect of what art does.

9 Herbert Plutschow, "An Anthropological Perspective on the Japanese Tea Ceremony," *Anthropoetics* 5:1 (Spring/Summer 1999): 4.

10 Kakuzo Okakura. *The Book of Tea* (Rutland, VT: C.E. Tuttle, 1956), 148.

The Build

My primary offering as an artist, however, is neither an escape from the burning house, nor a place of dissolution; I offer the pained build. My work is speaking to the incomplete nature of dissolution, the dance of dissolution and the structures that, even as a perseverance amidst the abundance of the world, we build. There are institutions, empires, thought-castles that we hold close to us and that we will continue to do. That process, the holding onto a root in the flood, is the purview of my making. The flood, the root and the hand are important in my practice. This is art that remembers Rothko's or Pollock's last figurative paintings, and respects their nearness to dissolution, and their continuing to deal with the concerns of the recognizable daily. I am concerned with the vulnerability of the human being within the physical world as the physical world changes form; but we are so active that the terrain of a vulnerability includes our defense, the consequences of a letting go include a holding on. I do not wish utterly to fly in the world of culture, because in my research I find a world with one wing and one foot; I wish in my art to make that the overlap sing. Ed Keinholz's work has been influential for me in its struggle to bring worlds to life within and around people and their frailties as points of interaction between the world and the person. My interests range further into the questions of how Things relate with each other, embodying worlds of our being in their conversations, and how archetypes are influenced in our absence. How has the recurrence of abandoned tires, complete with the fires and mosquitoes that are part of their defining, influenced the way that wheels roll through our imagination? How has the shaping of forests around roads changed how trees speak with the wheel?

I participate in an art that does not directly approach questions of being, but accepts the textures of these thing-to-thing conversations, the layering of pre-linguistic destabilizations, small vertigos and intermittent overloads. There is nothing in observation that can be disembodied, but there is nothing in the body that needs to be viewed as undermining the nature of observation. Art can tell stories and stories can bring with them, terrain.

The Artist as Ferryman: *Objet Petit a* and the Gallery as the River Styx

When so much of our world is not part of our own identity¹¹, I look for the culturally curative potential in art as a bridge, a porthole to a place that perhaps we cannot or will not easily go. I look for Lacan's *objet petit a* at work, providing a bridge difficult to cross, but whose existence suggests permeability on the level of being if not of body, in relation here to another place. In the case of art that grows from the pained build, this is a delicate dance, since as Daniel Mafe writes, *objet petite a*, “is not however simply an absence in the subject, it is more than that, it is an attracting absence.”¹² A wonderful concept for artists, *objet petit a* can also be dangerous; attraction can be subversive to ugly subject matter, making the dance around the *objet* fraught with the possibility of cross-canceling and failure.

The general unbridgeability of the divide between language and Thingworlds, is fundamental within both Kantian and Lacanian writing, and the notion that language could have a common “genre of discourse”¹³, with a world that is defined as being beyond language seems unlikely. And yet, there is that possibility of art that truly offers itself as a bridge for the willing between a beautiful discourse and an underearth heartbeat from beyond words.

Language as Predator, Art as the Knuckle of the Pterodactyl

The conceptual space of layered and self-referential language, of which there are many real-world examples, ranging from television to art, to, increasingly, language itself, as histories of successful languages continue to be recorded and expanded, becomes a fissure and an eruption from a different world of perception. Interestingly, it is also a world outside of the daily identitarian world, a world

11 By *identity* I mean that which we identify with, and that which identifies us in turn. In this case I see things moving out of our identity when we no longer wish to identify ourselves with them, when we throw themselves away, when we outgrow them.

12 Daniel J. Mafe. “Pontormo, Umberg and the End of the World: Painting and Lacan's Das Ding,” *The International Journal of the Humanities* 2.2 (2006): 1931.

13 Jean-François Lyotard, “The Differend: Phrases in Dispute” trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele. *Theory and History of Literature* 46 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1988), 11.

made from a second remainder-cum-world-of-worlds outside the everyday, outside the understood. In this case, it is not the world composed of Things, with that sense of the movement of the body in shadow, the briefly glimpsed at the edge of firelight. Instead, it is an aspirational agglomeration of soap bubble simulacra merging or shifting in the light. This is language reaching beyond the everyday world, calling for future, speaking to *that which does not exist* and referencing *that which never was, and might never be, that which almost is, and that, which may be coming*. When we think about television programming, we can think about language writ large reaching for our desires, making soap bubble worlds of our wishing; art makes something else clear at times, when terrain that feels necessary to the discourse of film or sculpture is filled and a relative few people truly appreciate it. Art illuminates, at times, the way that language follows its own exuberant goals with us as fascinated spectators, playing in or withdrawing as we, under the social pressures we each feel, see fit. The language of art, then, certainly is not language only seeking to describe, but a living and breathing Quixotic excess riding on what appears to be dependable descriptive donkey, if we must complete and thereby completely undermine the metaphors inherent in our words. And so to Derrida:

In Derridian terms, like a work of art¹⁴, any word, concept, or unit of language, *suggests* from within, in a never-ending, inexhaustible way¹⁵; as such, language necessarily and by its own nature, laterally exceeds the descriptive, becoming radical, self-referential abundances that move beyond comprehension, taking on some of the mysterious attributes of Things while yet being utterly untied to them.

Genetic theory argues that language has roots and uses in allowing description over distance, etc., but that language as we know it has always functioned in the overlapping crucibles of sociality and sexuality¹⁶. Even Longinus, a foundational figure in identifying the sublime, spoke of the rhetorical

14 Jaques Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, trans Geof Bennington and Ian Mcleod (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1987) 59.

15 Jaques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press 1982) 23.

16 Nicholas Wade, *Before the Dawn* (New York: Penguin Press 2006) 45.

sublime as language meant to inspire passion in its listeners. That is language becoming emotionally prescriptive and socially functional, without necessarily performing any descriptive function.¹⁷ With diverse examples starting with the peacock's tail, genetic psychologist Geofery Miller argues that traits that are the subject of sexual selection tend to get more complex as generations of individuals compete for love. This continues up until the excessive nature of the trait threatens the viability of the species in some other way, like attracting predation or interfering with food procurement¹⁸. Language may come by its uneasy relationship to the “things it's supposed to represent” simply. Language may have risen from the need to describe the world that the hand and eye can know, but its function as an field of interpersonal competition, such as courting, or applying for grants, or straight sociality and play, are often more important to us. As such, more language thrives through its desirable virtuosity than survives through its descriptive function.

And art, which so often promises its own functionlessness as a badge of uniqueness, does live in this sexy, social, competitive space of cuts and flowerings and cross-pollinations where the question of the existence of replacement cowboys might become as serious as the question of the grunts of war. The tracks we leave are as important as the judgements we make, maybe more so; I ground my dance in this space in a relationship largely external to this discourse, making my performance of my own art a sort of shadow-dance with a partner that, at the best of times is *almost there*. The terrain of the globalizing ecosystem and the specific engagement with forms with which we have a deep-proliferation or deep-time relationship give my sculptural language a fracture and structure beyond my own linguistic control.

17 Longinus *On the Sublime* trans. Benedict Einarson (Chicago: Parkard 1945).

18 Nicholas Wade *Before the Dawn* (New York: Penguin Press 2006) 45.

Hyperreality

Perhaps this kind of language leads directly to the creation of what Baudrillard described as the hyperreal, or “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality,”¹⁹ (or the simulation of something which never really existed) and the concerns that human beings might have a hard time distinguishing this double fiction from reality. Further, there is a suggestion that the proliferation of interconnected simulacra through moving images might create a comprehensive system of world-understanding that is more attractive to us than the actual world.

Within the ethos of this hyperreal, ourselves and others are rationalized according to norms, but in this case, the norms are based strictly on simulacra that do not seek to represent, but to out-compete each other. Popular culture, and in a more provisional way Art, in fact, is primarily measured by the cultural or economic capital it generates relative to its competitors rather than by its ability to describe reality or effect the larger ethics of this culture.

Language, including but not limited to this kind of hyperreal language, with its evident disinterest in faithfully representing our selves, bodies and our environment, becomes a force in the world of the real. It is unbounded and formless, with the sense of vertigo associated with storms and cliff faces. Similarly, it has nature's disinterest in us, and brings us to a sense of our own smallness within its size.

Sitting with an issue like Language seems more appropriate to our true relationship to it than seeking understanding: language was here long before any one of us was birthed, and will be here long after we each go. Like Art within and beyond it, it is an awesome force. We might influence it, change it in some ways, but even in so doing, we belong to it; we are social animals after all, and it is the sociality.

19 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor Michigan: University of Michigan Press 1981) 1.

On constellations, dark matter and the importance of art to the world

Closing with Heidegger, unexplained:

Art is a kind of “*saying which, in preparing the sayable, simultaneously brings the unsayable as such into a world. In such saying, the concepts of an historical people's nature, i.e., of its belonging to world history, are formed for that folk, before it.*”²⁰



Thickett. 2011. Detail

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry Language and Thought* trans. by Albert Hofstadter. (New York: Harper Collins 1971), 71.

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